

Comments on Susanna Siegel's The Contents of Visual Experience

Introduction

Plan:

- Three Problems with Siegel's Argument from Seeing
- Problem 1 & Partially Fixed Argument from Seeing
- Problem 2 & Fixed Argument from Seeing
- Residual Problem 3

Overview:

In chapter 2, Siegel presents her **Argument from Appearing (p. 45)**:

Premise (i)

All states of seeing objects having properties present clusters of properties as being instantiated.

Premise (ii)

If a state E of seeing object o having properties F presents a cluster of properties F as being instantiated, then:

Necessarily: things are the way E presents them only if property-cluster F is instantiated.

Premise (iii)

If necessarily: things are the way E presents them only if property-cluster F is instantiated, then:

E has a set of accuracy conditions C, conveyed to the subject of E, such that:

C is satisfied in a world only if there is something that has F in that world.

Premise (iv)

If E has a set of accuracy conditions C, conveyed to the subject of E, such that E is accurate only if C, then: things are the way E presents them only if property-cluster F is instantiated, then:

E has a set of accuracy conditions C*, conveyed to the subject of E, such that E is accurate iff C*.

Conclusion: All states of seeing objects having properties have contents.

In chapter 6, she posits that this argument carries over seamlessly into an argument for singular content.

Siegel's Argument from Seeing (p. 155-6):

Premise (i*)

All states of seeing objects having properties present clusters of properties as being instantiated by the objects seen.

Premise (ii)

If a state E of seeing object o having properties F presents a cluster of properties F as being instantiated,

then:

Necessarily: things are the way E presents them only if property-cluster F is instantiated.

Premise (iii)

If necessarily: things are the way E presents them only if property-cluster F is instantiated, then:

E has a set of accuracy conditions C, conveyed to the subject of E, such that:

C is satisfied in a world only if there is something that has F in that world.

Premise (iv)

If E has a set of accuracy conditions C, conveyed to the subject of E, such that E is accurate only if C, then: things are the way E presents them only if property-cluster F is instantiated, then:

E has a set of accuracy conditions C*, conveyed to the subject of E, such that E is accurate iff C*.

Conclusion: All states of seeing objects having properties have contents.

The only difference between the Argument from Appearing and the Argument from Seeing is that Premise (i) is replaced with Premise (i*).

Problems with Siegel's Argument from Seeing:

Problem 1: Argument is supposed to establish that states of seeing have singular content, but the conclusion does not speak to whether contents are singular.

Problem 2: Premise (iv) can't be right: even if C is singular, there is no guarantee that the singularity of C is passed on to C*.

Problem 3: Premise (i*) is either phenomenologically implausible or it does not support the view that states of seeing have singular content.

Problem 1: Argument Doesn't Support the View that Perceptual Experience has Singular Content

- The only thing changed between "Argument from Appearing" and "Argument from Seeing" is that premise (i*) is added to introduce the objects seen.
- But these objects seen don't come up again in the rest of the premises. And they don't come up in the conclusion.
- The conclusion is simply: "All states of seeing objects having properties have contents." So, the conclusion does not speak to whether contents are singular.
- This problem can be fixed by adjusting premisses (ii)-(iv) so that they include the objects seen. That will yield the following argument.

Solution to Problem 1: Partially Fixed Argument from Seeing:

Premise (i*)

All states of seeing objects having properties present clusters of properties as being instantiated by the objects seen.

Premise (ii*)

If a state E of seeing object o having properties F presents a cluster of properties F as being instantiated by o, then:

Necessarily: things are the way E presents them only if property-cluster F is instantiated by o.

Premise (iii*)

If necessarily: things are the way E presents them only if property-cluster F is instantiated by o, then:

E has a set of accuracy conditions C, conveyed to the subject of E, such that:

C is satisfied in a world only if ~~there is something that has~~ o is F in that world.

Premise (iv*)

If E has a set of accuracy conditions C, conveyed to the subject of E, such that E is accurate only if C, then: things are the way E presents them only if property-cluster F is instantiated by o, then:

E has a set of accuracy conditions C*, conveyed to the subject of E, such that E is accurate iff C*.

Conclusion: All states of seeing objects having properties have (objectually) singular contents.

Problem 2: Premise (iv)

- Premise (iv) faces the problem that even if C is singular, nothing guarantees that the singularity of C gets passed on to C*. For all that has been said C* could be an existentially generalized content.
- This problem is solved if one replaces Premise (iv) with a different premise:

Premise (iv):** If E has a set of accuracy conditions C, conveyed to the subject of E, such that C is satisfied in a world only if o is F in that world, then the state E of seeing object o has (objectually) singular contents.

Solution to Problems 1 & 2: Fixed Argument from Seeing

Premise (i*)

All states of seeing objects having properties present clusters of properties as being instantiated by the objects seen.

Premise (ii*)

If a state E of seeing object o having properties F presents a cluster of properties F as being instantiated by o, then:

Necessarily: things are the way E presents them only if property-cluster F is instantiated by o.

Premise (iii*)

If necessarily: things are the way E presents them only if property-cluster F is instantiated by o, then:

E has a set of accuracy conditions C, conveyed to the subject of E, such that:

C is satisfied in a world only if ~~there is something that has~~ o is F in that world.

~~Premise (iv)~~

~~If E has a set of accuracy conditions C, conveyed to the subject of E, such that E is accurate only if C, then: things are the way E presents them only if property-cluster F is instantiated, then:~~

~~E has a set of accuracy conditions C*, conveyed to the subject of E, such that E is accurate iff C*.~~

Premise (iv)**

If E has a set of accuracy conditions C, conveyed to the subject of E, such that C is satisfied in a world only if o is F in that world, then the state E of seeing object o has an (objectually) singular content.

Conclusion: All states of seeing objects having properties have **(objectually) singular** contents.

- Siegel claims (p. 156) that her arguments for the premises of her Argument from Appearing carry over to her Argument from Seeing.
- Given that the object to which one is perceptually related to is made explicit in each of the premises of the Fixed Argument from Seeing, but is not made explicit in either Siegel's Argument from Appearing or in her Argument from Seeing, it is not obvious that those arguments carry over to the Fixed Argument from Seeing. But I will leave this problem to the side to focus on problems with Premise (i*).

Problem 3: Premise (i*)

- Question for Siegel: How should we read Premise (i*)?
- Natural reading: Premise (i*-a): All states of seeing objects having properties present a specific particular, e.g. this cup, as instantiating a cluster of properties.
- Possible alternative reading: Premise (i*-b): All states of seeing objects having properties present that there is some particular (but not which one) as instantiating a cluster of properties.
- The problem with Premise (i*-a) is that it makes a controversial claim about the phenomenal character of perceptual experience. It builds too much into the phenomenal character.

- The problem with Premise (i*-b) is that it doesn't support the view that perceptual content is singular content. It supports only the view that perceptual content is existentially quantified content.
- Premise (i*-a) corresponds to what can be called relational particularity.
- Premise (i*-b) corresponds to what can be called phenomenological particularity.

Relational Particularity: A mental state instantiates relational particularity iff the subject in virtue of being in that mental state is perceptually related to the particular object perceived.

Phenomenological Particularity: A mental state instantiates phenomenological particularity if it (perceptually) seems to the subject in virtue of being in that mental state that there is a particular object present.

It is widely accepted that perceptual experiences are as of particulars. This can be the case even if the experiencing subject is not in fact perceptually related to a particular. After all, when we hallucinate, it seems to us that there is a particular where in fact there is no such particular. Contrast such phenomenological particularity from what we can call relational particularity.

Why Premise (i*-a) is implausible:

- By positing that the state of seeing presents such things as whether it is this particular cup rather than a qualitatively indistinguishable but numerically distinct cup that one sees, Siegel builds relational particularity into the phenomenal character of experience, that is, it is built into the phenomenal character of experience whether we are seeing cup1 or cup2, where cup1 and cup2 are numerically distinct, but qualitatively indistinguishable.
- But arguably there is no difference in phenomenal character of seeing cup1 and seeing cup2, where cup1 and cup2 are numerically distinct but qualitatively indistinguishable.

Why Premise (i*-b) would not get one to the conclusion that Siegel is aiming to establish:

- It supports only that experience reflects phenomenological particularity. It does not support that experience reflects relational particularity.
- As a consequence, it does not cut any ice in getting one to the idea that perceptual experience has singular content.
- Premise (i*-b) does not satisfy the antecedent of premise (ii*).

Solution to Problem 3:

- Siegel's strategy is to go through phenomenal character to establish that experience has singular content. But she can only do this by making implausible assumptions about what is revealed in phenomenal character.
- A solution to this problem is to argue for singular content not on the basis of what is presented in experience, but rather on the basis only of what one is perceptually related to, where which particular object one is perceptually related to need not be revealed in phenomenal character.
- Accepting this would support accepting the following premise:
- Premise (i*-c): All states of seeing objects having properties include a subject being perceptually related to a cluster of properties instantiated by the object seen.¹

¹ For an argument to the conclusion that perception has singular content without going via phenomenal character, see my 2010.